

SLATE

This New Style of Climate Denial Will Make You Wish the Bad Old Days Were Back

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If you are concerned about our warming world, you should know who Alex Epstein is. The libertarian intellectual, who's presented himself as the "next generation in energy thought," has long hammered at a thesis that's the next big thing in climate denial: Fossil fuels are *not* leading to an uninhabitable Earth but have actually improved Earth's natural and built habitats, and contributed to "human flourishing." Because of this, the unfettered development of oil and gas and coal is a "moral" imperative; if you oppose this "irrefutable" fact, you're a genocidal, racist, anti-human, and anti-science fool who would rather have billions of people slip into poverty and/or die for the benefit of "nature," which, Epstein argues, kills more humans on its own than any climate effects do. It's a set of ideas he's boosted for the past two decades through work with the Ayn Rand Institute, the Cato Institute, and his own "for-profit" think tank, the Center for Industrial Progress.

Epstein, a master at having it both ways, realizes that you, the average Slate reader, probably consider his mission to achieve unlimited fossil fuel production to be at odds with global concerns over human-influenced impacts on climate and nature. And trust him, he shares your concerns and would not like to be described as a "denier." But he's also really worried about how our "knowledge system"—big newspapers, prominent scientists, the United Nations—distorts scientific findings and exaggerates climate-related warnings and predictions, which is why he pals around with conspiracy theorists like Lauren Boebert, Dennis Prager, Scott Adams, and Candace Owens. By the way, as much as Epstein respects the Koch brothers, his ideology would never be influenced by their dark money network, even though he's worked for decades at multiple institutions financially supported by the oil and policy magnates. Plus, he wants to debate opponents in good faith and is opposed to "ad hominem" attacks, which is why he refers to climate-concerned politicians as "fascists" and "monsters" while mobilizing his supporters to demand the termination of journalists who perform factual analyses of his oeuvre.

Epstein has of course been criticized by several climate-focused journalists, scholars, activists, and scientists, and has made a big show of holding debates with thinkers like Bill McKibben. These critiques have not stopped his ideas from gaining currency within U.S. politics, especially following the publication of his first bestseller, *The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels*, in 2014. His concepts have been embraced and regurgitated by publications like the Wall Street Journal, companies like Chevron, Koch-backed PACs like the Club for Growth, politicians like Texas

Rep. Dan Crenshaw, and organizations like Young America's Foundation. Epstein has testified to Congress multiple times on the need for fossil fuels—invited by Sen. Jim “Snowball” Inhofe—and enjoyed the support of the far-right, explicitly anti-democratic political operative Peter Thiel. And now, Epstein's used his elevated profile to release another tract building upon his moral worldview, titled *Fossil Future: Why Global Human Flourishing Requires More Oil, Coal, and Natural Gas—Not Less*.

With the blessing of Penguin Random House's Portfolio imprint, which bills itself as providing nonfiction for “ambitious people” and also published Epstein's previous book, *Fossil Future* offers a newer, more reassuring flavor of doubt regarding the consequences of human-influenced climate effects. Oil and gas and coal aren't actually ruining Earth's habitats for all forms of life, and they're also not neutral—in fact, fossil fuels are making things *better* for all of us, thanks to their natural density and economic efficiency. But even if they do lead to rising carbon levels and emissions, it actually won't be *that* bad, at least not as horrific as the economic fallout of transitioning away from fossil fuels would be. Epstein argues that fossil fuels will actually *protect* us from their own adverse side effects, that phenomena like mass human displacement and ocean acidification won't really be issues, and that all government standards meant to stem greenhouse gas emissions must be done away with. To retain the standard of living billions of Earthlings enjoy, and to bring this “flourishing” to the billions more Earthlings who don't yet enjoy it thanks to influence by “anti-human” climate activists, unlimited fossil fuel production is the only way forward.

Epstein presents himself as a young naïf who, before 2007, was led astray by climate “catastrophizers” into believing there are no benefits to fossil fuels. That's an unlikely story, considering he'd been publishing pro-oil and anti-environmentalism pieces as far back as 2004, but it makes for a good morality tale and fashions him into a handy audience surrogate. He claims to have written *Fossil Future* “primarily for the countless honest, good people who expect to strongly disagree with me.” The book is marketed as an “honest, pro-human, pro-science analysis” praised by such supposedly credible figures as Scott Pruitt and Mark Mills. With *Fossil Future*, Epstein earnestly writes, he wishes only to present one side of a “debate,” and to convince skeptical readers that his thesis is “definitive.”

In the interest of fairness, I'll start with the rare moments Epstein makes valid points. Much of the setup for *Fossil Future*'s thesis rests on historic predictions of climate change—fueled disasters that didn't end up panning out, such as '70s-era projections of “global cooling,” as well as past environmentalists' warnings of “peak oil” depletion and a “population bomb.” As *Fossil Future* makes sure to emphasize, there were projections from prominent studies that overshot the amount of temperature warming we'd see by certain years—though it's worth noting that even when you factor in such overshoots, the vast majority of historic climate change projections were found to have been accurate. (The idea that the reason certain past models missed specific benchmarks could be that environment- and climate-friendly measures were adopted in the years *following* such studies never seems to cross this author's mind). Epstein also fairly notes that the classification of who counts as a “climate scientist” can be somewhat broad and unspecific, and that it hasn't helped the case of climate activists that some of these scientists opposed the buildout of nuclear fusion, a viable (and relatively safe) clean energy source, while perhaps championing biomass, which is neither. He also lays out the hypocrisy of companies like

Apple claiming to be “renewable” through employing dubious “carbon offset” accounting, which—yeah? That’s not good. That’s about all the book gets right, however, and a lot of these arguments are ones that climate advocates themselves have advanced.

It’s important to define the philosophical place from which Epstein approaches his evaluation of human-caused climate effects: by seeing human-industrial impacts as not only a net good, but as the *only* just way of the world. He mentions his support of animal testing for medicine and science, a stance he claims to share with “most people” (not really), because our “primary moral goal” should be seen to “advance human flourishing,” not “prevent animal suffering and death.” If you’re not on board with this, Epstein writes, you are thinking from an “anti-human” stance and are totally fine with people dying.

If you perceive this line of argument as reductive and generalizing, well, let me tell you it’s exactly that kind of reasoning that underpins the rest of the book. Per Epstein, banning DDT was wrong, mass die-offs of fish in the oceans would be fine because the only actual loss would be to the fishing industry, and humans were mere patsies who existed mainly to be killed en masse by natural disasters before they learned to “master” nature using fossil fuel–powered industrial machines and tools. (He later makes the case that it actually could be fine for the planet to reach blazing temperatures, because in past eras, when global temperatures were far hotter than now, primates were still able to thrive. OK, so which one is it?)

Epstein reduces millennia of human history to the preindustrial age, and everything after, making some convenient elisions in the process. He claims that systems like mass agriculture, fire management, and storm resistance assumed their full and best form only after the first oil wells were dug. The incredible accomplishments and advances in all these fields made by ancient civilizations and Indigenous peoples get zero mention, which checks out for a man with a lifelong belief in the “superiority” of “Western culture.” He makes strawmen out of climate activists’ critiques of human impact on nature, claiming that they’re actually opposed to *all* human effects on natural environments and would rather have “people in Africa” die than get access to energy. Literally a simple Google search would make anyone realize this is poppycock, considering how cautious many international energy-transition partnerships have been, keeping in mind current resources and economics while gradually installing green energy sources. But that’s the level of rigorous study exhibited within this screed.

Near the beginning, *Fossil Future* includes two graphs showing how, as fossil fuel production increased, so did the human population. If fossil fuels actually worsen our habitats, how come there are so many humans? Checkmate! Epstein tries to build off such data to prove that fossil fuels are responsible for human “flourishing,” even though he admits that the large majority of the world currently lives in poverty. But to him, the reason that many other countries are poorer and lack energy access is clearly because they don’t have *enough* fossil fuels. Naturally, the continuing exploitation of formerly colonized nations is never mentioned. He points to India as a paragon of fossil fuel development, which has resulted in the well-being of its massive population—an interesting section to read, as millions of Indians’ power lines have been knocked out recently by climate change–strengthened heat waves.

The author downplays the growth of renewables over the decades, purporting to show that solar and wind just inherently don't have the same "cost-effectiveness" of fossil fuels, which is why they depend on government subsidies, lead to environmental damage when they are built, and don't dominate the power grid. This is, of course, a way to sidestep the massive environmental degradation fossil fuel companies have inflicted over centuries (with the support of government subsidies all the while), and continue to inflict with the support of current subsidies and federal land auctions. Epstein is not wrong that electricity-powered plants have helped to clean up water supplies for mass consumption, although he undercuts himself here when he claims there is basically nothing wrong with fracking—sorry to you if your groundwater was polluted by its effects.

I could go on regarding the myriad ways Epstein misrepresents history and science and activism, whether by stating that "net zero" means total fossil fuel elimination (which is definitionally not the case), or claiming that increased carbon dioxide will just be more "plant food" (which is incredibly misleading), or spewing the pseudoscientific claim that only certain parts of the world will become warmer, which is good because humans like warmth. (They also love frequent, long-lasting droughts and heat waves, naturally.) But I'll wind down by looking at another stat Epstein hitches his train to: the idea that "climate deaths" have dropped over time. It's difficult to count deaths that can be directly blamed on climate change, to be sure, as attribution science has been careful not to overstate such assumptions, while surveys of such deaths have baflingly excluded causes of death like pollution. And it's not untrue that weather warning and resilience systems powered by technology have saved lives, even as high-impact storms have increased in amount and severity. But if you look at the entire scope of climate-affected natural processes—everything from pollution to large hurricanes to pathogens to crop die-offs to farmers' livelihoods to infrastructure collapse to power loss from frozen gas lines and still more—the relatively low numbers we point to as "climate deaths" seem a little more deceptive.

At the end of the day, it still feels somewhat futile to counter all these individual points of argument. Alex Epstein's lengthy, tedious, repetitive tome returns to one idea, over and over again: We live in a society powered by fossil fuels, and no matter the problems we have now, the "flourishing" of modern society dictates that we only need more, more, more. In effect, *Fossil Future* reads like an earnest book-length version of Matt Bors' "You Participate in Society" comic-turned-meme: If you hate fossil fuels, you hate the humans (like you and me) who've benefited from them as a power source, and therefore, you are only to be mocked.

The most troubling thing about Epstein, though, may be that he's basically already won. The United States is set to keep drilling more oil and natural gas to try to stem current price instabilities, even under a "climate president." The same major newspapers Epstein derides as catastrophizing about the issue still regularly publish op-eds that downplay the severity of global warming. Others not of Epstein's intellectual bent have either implicitly or explicitly considered climate effects to be "manageable." The new style of climate denial is here: It's not that carbon emissions aren't increasing, or aren't warming the world, but look, you're doing fine right now, right? So, we'll be just fine! So, congrats to Alex Epstein, congrats to Penguin Random House, congrats to all the backward poors in non-Western civilizations, and congrats to all of us who

will surely live lives ever more empowered and thriving, even as ecological collapse kills more of us year after year.